

YOUR
LETTERS

MAILBOX

You've been putting us in our place this month, so here we try to make things clear. Unfortunately, some of you still haven't done enough for a Shopper mug. But first, a cautionary tale

★ Star Letter Internet anonymity: a right or a threat?



The internet is a dangerous place. This fact was brought home to me last month after my 15-year-old daughter had a nasty experience. She discovered that one of her school friends, although she doesn't know who, had been posting details about her on the internet. This includes photographs, details of conversations she's had and even an audio recording of her voice.

This is the result of a sick obsession, and there's nothing I can do about it because we don't know exactly who has done this. We have suspicions, but I'm not about to accuse a child of being a sicko without some serious proof.

My main concern is that the internet is not policed or regulated. There seems to be no recourse. I'm sure child porn websites are removed all the time, and that if someone sent a threatening email to me I could get the police involved, but it seems impossible to track down someone who is being creepy at best and a potential stalker at worst.

The main obstacle, as I can best observe, is that there are lots of ways you can be anonymous on the internet. With a combination of a free webmail account, a free account on a photo-sharing website and access to free website forums, you can construct completely fictional personalities. I doubt that you could steal someone's identity this way, but you could harass them and even mislead them into thinking that an innocent third party was responsible.

Name withheld

The internet is a combination of useless misinformation, useful research, helpful souls and evil

individuals, just like any regular society. However, whereas you know to dial 999 in a real-world emergency, what do normal people do when they experience online illegality?

It is possible to track misbehaving people over the internet, although it is not usually easy if that person has made an effort to hide their tracks. It will almost always need the cooperation of ISPs and the companies that provide the email and web forum services. The police should also be involved. You don't need to know any special contact numbers. Your local station should be the first port of call.

If there was any doubt that there are weirdos out there, last month the US Attorney General Alberto Gonzales claimed that 20 per cent of children online have been approached by some of the 50,000 paedophiles who lurk on the internet. While we don't think the internet should be off-limits to kids, it needs to be treated as a potentially dangerous place.

As you say, it is easy to build a fake persona on the internet, which is why you should not trust strangers on chat forums or mailing lists any more than you would someone who comes up to you in the street and joins you in conversation. The nature of the internet means you don't even have someone's appearance on which to judge them. You can't tell if you are talking to a young girl or an old man.

In your case, it is likely the services providing the free forums and photo-sharing sites will cooperate if you contact them directly. If they remove the content, this will at least send a warning message to the person who posted the pictures that what they are doing is wrong. You could do worse than contact the police, too. We send our best wishes to your daughter.

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LOGGING A COMPLAINT



In 'Who's Spying on You?', *Shopper* June 2006, you very modestly omitted to tell us where offending keylogging software is distributed. The answer, of course, is that it is available from the *Computer Shopper* website. On your website, AceSpy 2.2 records chats, emails, web addresses, passwords and much more, while Activity Keylogger 1.60 records keystrokes, chat, screen activity and websites visited.

So when will you be running a definitive group test of keyloggers, and will you be awarding *Computer Shopper* mugz for the best exploitz?

Charles Quekett

You raise an interesting question about where the responsibility lies with software that can be abused easily. Is a program that allows you to spy on users inherently wrong, even if you install it on your own computer to check for unauthorised use in your absence? When Sony included rootkit-like software on

its music CDs, was it taking reasonable steps to protect its copyright or was it hacking customers' computers?

Spy software is available from many legitimate places on the internet, including the 5 Star Shareware service that provides software downloads on *Shopper's* website. If they are used only by people with a strong sense of responsibility, you could argue that there is a place for such programs. The problem is, not everyone is responsible. Let us know what you think.

VIRAL REVIEWING



I read your recent review of anti-virus software with interest and initially some concern. However, how much notice should one take of a single review of this type of software?

No computer security product is perfect; all products have less than 100 per cent detection. The nature of this type of software is such that one should never expect any one application to intercept and remove everything, all the time.



Unlike other software that, apart from bug patches, remains unchanged until the next version is released, anti-virus – and also anti-spy – software can be considered dynamic. It is being updated continuously, very often on a daily basis, both with file definitions and upgrades to the underlying engine. Thus the effectiveness of any product can be expected to vary over time.

Take, for example, Alwil's avast!. After reading your tests, many readers will be seriously considering replacing their copy of avast! with a product you now recommend. However, avast! has won many awards; it is regularly granted the Virus Bulletin 100% award. Thus, does taking a snapshot at one instance give a true and meaningful indication of its overall effectiveness?

What we, the end users, need to know is whether any particular product is consistently good or bad. If we simply react to the latest performance review, we will end up changing our security software as often as some people change their energy supplier on the basis of the most recent price review.

Your review would have been of more value had the reviewer stepped back following the tests and looked at other relevant material that is readily accessible online. Your readers could then have been presented with a more informed, balanced report, and one that could be useful as a basis for choice or change.

Bryan Wilson

The anti-virus test was very straightforward. We selected some of the most popular anti-virus software on the market and exposed each program to a series of real viruses and Trojans. These files were genuine examples of viruses that had been running riot on the internet for at least a week or two. There was plenty of time for the anti-virus firms to generate effective updates to counter the threats.

It is true that other organisations run anti-virus tests, and plenty of the products we tested have Virus Bulletin 100% awards. It's just as well we didn't do as you suggest and rely on other people's research, because our results showed that very few of the test subjects could detect 100 per cent of even the few viruses we tried.

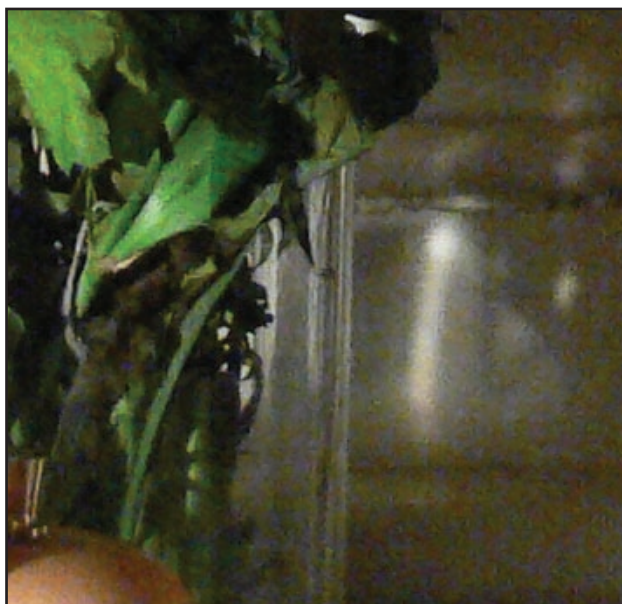
The point you make about anti-virus software being dynamic is a valid one. Often a program is only as good as its last update. But we have been testing anti-virus software for years, and regular readers can see which products consistently perform well and which perform poorly.

Someone else wrote a letter making more or less the same points, and the writer defended his choice of software (which had performed poorly in our tests) by claiming that it had never yet missed a virus. How could he know?

SNAPPY EDITING

As a long-time photography enthusiast, I was particularly interested to see, as I picked up my subscription copy of *Shopper* this month, that you were testing a number of digital cameras. However, when I read the Labs test and the reviews, I became very confused and I suspect that I may not be the only one.

In the Nikon D50 review, it says "auto-focus was quick and reliable". The summary in the same review lists as a negative point "fussy



◀ The soft 'painted' effect is designed to disguise noise in the image

auto-focus". What is a potential customer supposed to make of these two statements?

In the Panasonic DMC-FZ30 review, you state that "while shots taken at ISO 200 and 400 weren't that noisy, they had a slightly smudged, painted appearance." But in the verdict you say that the camera "produces great images". You say in the review that it produces better images at low ISO settings, but I think many photographers converting from film cameras would regard ISO 200 film as medium speed. We are used to grain effects at ISO 400+, but most people would not expect to see problems with ISO 200 unless it is hugely enlarged. I would be most unhappy if shots I had taken could be described as smudgy or painted in appearance.

Please offer some clarification on these apparently contradictory statements. My son, looking at your Nikon report, suggested "either they are hedging their bets, or have got the wrong points ascribed to the camera".

It is also worth pointing out that for most photographers, their choice of brand will be dictated by the lenses and accessories they possess, since prices offered for second-hand lenses when traded in are abysmally low.

Les Pitts

You are absolutely right about the D50 review. Unfortunately, due to space restraints this review had to be trimmed. The original copy stated that "auto-focus was quick and generally reliable, but when it failed to find a target to lock on to, the camera refused to take a picture, which could be annoying". Clearly, the latter important point was lost in the edit. It's probably just as well "fussy auto-focus" remained in the summary, otherwise the D50 would have got off the hook completely.

Panasonic's DMC-FZ30's "slightly smudged, painted appearance" is extremely subtle and only visible onscreen when viewed at high magnification. Check out the enlargement above to see the effect. The DMC-FZ30 does this on purpose to deal with the noise that would otherwise appear. We mentioned it in the review because we're super-strict and because all the cameras tested performed so well.

It's a matter of weighing up the pros and cons of relative performance. The Panasonic camera exhibits less noise than many of the other fixed-lens cameras on test, but has more noise-reduction artefacts. The maximum ISO setting we'd recommend depends on how you'll be using your photos. For onscreen viewing or 6x4" prints, the 8-megapixel resolution means

WRITE IN AND WIN!

Adobe has kindly agreed to give a bundle of its popular Photoshop Elements and Premiere Elements software to this month's Star Letter writer, who will receive a powerful graphics program familiar to professional graphic designers, as well as the top-notch video-editing package Premiere Elements 2.0. Photoshop Elements 4.0 enables you to edit and enhance your digital photos easily and effectively, while Premiere Elements makes it simple to edit your own home movies like a pro.



PLUS!

Every letter-writer who provides their address also receives a Computer Shopper mug



**STAR PRIZE
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that these artefacts are so small as to be totally insignificant at ISO 400.

On the other hand, if we were making massive enlargements, we'd probably limit ourselves to ISO 100. However, we'd be happy to use ISO 200 for everyday use. The ISO 200 artefacts were considerably less visible than those at ISO 400.

AROUND THE WORLD IN 80MB

 In *Buying Help*, *Shopper* May 2006, Robert Bruce asked for a way to store digital photos on long trips without lugging a notebook with him. My advice may be too late for his trip, but I thought I'd let others know how I solved the problem on my world tour.

I too used an On-The-Go bridge similar to the Belkin USB Anywhere product you recommend. This transfers photos from a camera directly to a USB hard disk. I pair this with an AC/DC power adaptor kit from Philex to cope with all the different mains voltages. All three items – the digital camera, transfer box and hard drive – fit into the side pouch of a small hand luggage bag.

Don Avery

Thanks for that handy bit of travel information, Don. There are plenty of so-called USB data copiers around. The cheapest we found was the Pendrive 2 Copy 2 Portable USB2 Data Copier, which costs around £16 including VAT from www.microdirect.co.uk.

If you own an iPod, you can save yourself the bother of carrying around a hard disk. A device such as the Apple iPod



▲ The Belkin USB Anywhere can transfer photos to a portable disk

Camera Connector will allow you to connect your camera to the iPod and upload pictures to its internal disk. Apple sells them for £19 including VAT. Check on Apple's site to make sure your camera is supported.

HE WHO HESITATES...

 I recently visited the website of a well-known hosting company and checked the availability of the name that I wanted, using the .co.uk top-level domain (TLD). It showed as being available. I started doing some research on setting up a business and checked the availability again a week or two later. It was still available. Next I decided to start printing all my promotional material, including flyers, pamphlets and so on. About a week later, I went back to the site, ready to register my domain using this web host, only for it to say that the domain was taken.

This was very annoying, as all my marketing material had been printed. It listed other TLDs with the same name I wanted, but at higher prices. So I went to another UK hosting company and did a search for the .co.uk TLD I wanted. It showed it as available.

This indicated to me that the original host was trying to pull the wool over my eyes, maybe to get more money from me.

Perhaps these hosts do this when a domain has had a certain number of searches run on it. But, for whatever reason, it seems unethical and I would urge readers to shop around if your domain shows up as being taken.

Steve Goddard

Domain names cost very little to register, particularly with the .co.uk suffix. As luck would have it, readers can find out all about registering a domain name this month, as it is the subject of *Business Help* on page 230.

It seems unlikely that a domain registration company would deliberately tell you a domain was taken if it wasn't, because then it would miss out on selling you that domain. We remember rumours from many years ago of unscrupulous companies offering a domain name search and registering the names that people searched for. It then tried to sell the domains on at a high price.

The moral of this story is, if you have a domain name in mind and find it is available, register it straight away. Domains are allocated on a first-come, first-served basis, and for the sake of a tenner you'd be unwise to leave it any longer than necessary.

MUG SHOT

 After buying several copies of your informative magazine, I thought I'd ask, do I need to get a letter printed to get a free mug or will you send me one if I just give you my address? Could you specify the criteria?

Peter Carey

Yes, you do need to have a letter published in *Computer Shopper* to qualify for one of our fantastic mugs. The other criterion is that you have to provide an address for us to send it to, saving us the pain of chasing everyone. Although you now fit the primary criteria, you fell at the last post by failing to send us your address. If you want to push it, send us another email with your address and exactly 100 words on "Why I deserve a *Computer Shopper* mug".

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The Editor is always pleased to receive ideas for articles, preferably sent first in outline form, with details of the author's background and, where available, samples of previously published work. We cannot, however, accept responsibility for unsolicited copy and it may take time for us to reply.

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GET OUTTA HERE

✉ Included on your June 2006 cover disc is a copy of a 'talking' dictionary with the description that it "is the definitive single-volume reference of the English language". I beg to differ.

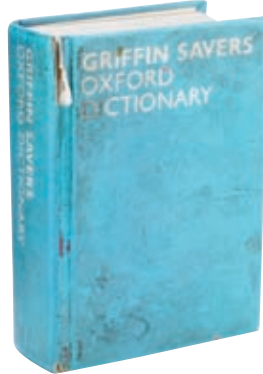
Webster's is an American dictionary, or more accurately a United States dictionary, and is as English as grits and hominy pie. As Lerner and Loewe so aptly put it, "there even are places where English completely disappears. In America, they haven't used it for years!"

Is there no-one in your office with a copy of the Concise Oxford Dictionary?

Have a nice day.

Sean Brady

Hey, Sean. We ain't no rookies, man. We got ourselves a darn fine dictionary. The official *Shopper* reference is a stained Griffin Savers Oxford Dictionary (see image right), as given away to young savers by the then Midland Bank in the 1980s. Go figure, y'all.



▲ Griffin Savers: the definitive reference for all wordsmiths

F-SECURE CORRECTION

Last month's review of F-Secure Anti-Virus (*Labs, Shopper* June 2006) incorrectly quoted the price as £33. The correct price is £27 including VAT. In light of

this error, we have increased the program's rating from four stars to five stars.

INCORRECT BONUS DISC

Computer Shopper June 2006 was supposed to come with the full version of Microsoft Visual Basic 2005 Express Edition as a bonus CD. Unfortunately, due to an error by our disc-publishing department, the wrong master disc was duplicated. Instead of the intended product, the Beta 2 version of Visual Basic was put into production. This was not an error on Microsoft's part, but a mix-up at *Computer Shopper*.

We are doing our best to put this right. We're hoping that everyone who tries the Beta 2 disc will get in touch so that we can send out replacements free of charge. Readers can obtain

a replacement CD containing the full Express Edition version by emailing their name and address to VBEE05@cisubs.co.uk or by calling 08704 030339.

To make extra sure that regular readers don't miss out, we have also included the full Visual Basic 2005 Express Edition product on this issue's bonus cover-mount. See the box below for details of four further Microsoft Express Edition products also included on the bonus CD.

We are very sorry for this mistake. ☹

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Your free bonus Microsoft CD

MICROSOFT VISUAL STUDIO EXPRESS EDITIONS

This month's bonus disc includes five easy-to-learn programming tools that are ideal for the hobbyist, novice and student developer.

- Visual Basic 2005 Express Edition is an ideal first-time programming language that also allows experts to build powerful Windows programs. Those familiar with older incarnations of the Basic language will feel particularly at home. See 'Programming for Beginners', June 2006 for a full tutorial.
- Visual C# 2005 Express Edition was designed from the ground up to meet the needs of Windows developers and provides a great combination of power and productivity.
- Visual C++ 2005 Express Edition is aimed at more advanced programmers, providing more power and a finer degree of control than other Express Editions.



- Visual J# 2005 Express Edition is ideal for those with prior Java-language experience or those learning the Java language.
- Visual Web Developer 2005 Express Edition is an ideal environment to start learning dynamic web development.

Your CD also includes SQL Server 2005 Express Edition, a powerful and easy-to-use database.

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